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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSUL 000009

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SUBJECT: KURDISTAN ISLAMIC UNION, BRINGING DEMOCRACY BACK TO IRAQI KURDISTAN

REF: MOSUL 195

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) REO Poloff met with Nineva members of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) on February 2. KIU provincial director Sabbah Baberi believes KIU, given their strong showing after the December national election, could now play an important role in Iraqi Kurdistan by moving the PUK and KDP, "back to democracy." Baberi claims the two larger parties tightly control freedom of speech and association to the detriment of the Kurdish people. He said the PUK and KDP operate like "separate governments," and that corruption is causing the good that has occurred in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as development and security, to "crumble." Baberi believes KIU can focus on these issues and act as an honest broker between KDP and PUK, to help "give Kurds faith" in the democratic process. Baberi hopes that top-level KIU officers might be able to meet more regularly with high-level U.S. officials, which he believes would help give Kurds not affiliated with PUK or KDP "more faith" that the USG cares for them. Baberi asked for USG support for KIU's work in this regard in Iraqi Kurdistan. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) REO Poloff met with members of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) in Mosul on February 2. Members in attendance were political affairs officer Shawkat Sharafani and Nineva director Sabbah Baberi. Baberi recently became provincial director after the death of former director, Mushir Ahmat (reftel).

ROLE OF THE "THIRD PARTY"

¶3. (C) Poloff welcomed KIU members Baberi and Sharafani where discussion quickly moved towards issues of democracy and freedom of speech in Iraqi Kurdistan. Baberi believes, like smaller opposition parties, that KIU has a role to play to help lessen the political domination of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KDP) whom KIU claims are "regressing democratically." Baberi said although there are many positives in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as security and infrastructure, the cores of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) are "crumbling." He said in effect two parties control the area "for their own benefit." Baberi believes KIU can help reshape the debate by appealing to all sectors of the population. He spoke at some length about recent KIU success in the December national election, where they won five seats despite what he terms as "flagrant incidents of fraud," as a permit to push against KDP and PUK. Baberi said, however, KIU is "limited financially" and still fears more attacks from the two larger parties (reftel).

IRAQI KURDISTAN AND TWO PARTY CONTROL

¶4. (C) Baberi said after the no fly zone was established, the PUK and KDP could not reach agreement after elections were held in 1992. As a result, Baberi said Iraqi Kurdistan was "split in two." He claims divisions between KDP and PUK did not improve after a ceasefire in the late 1990s (the two parties were at war before that time), or even after liberation in 2003. Baberi said he heard a rumor that KDP and PUK signed an agreement to remain a coalition until 2015. While some would view this as a move towards unification, Baberi believes having the two so closely aligned means "democracy would suffer." Baberi believes, unfortunately, that human rights and freedom of speech have regressed and are worsening everyday.

¶5. (C) Baberi said almost three years after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, there are "three governments" Kurdish Iraqis must follow: The KDP in northern Kurdistan, the PUK in southern Kurdistan, and the Iraqi central government. Baberi claims ministries (especially of defense, interior, and finance) from the three governments do not speak to one other. He said many Islamic NGOs who have registered in Baghdad are not allowed to operate in KDP Kurdistan, for example, because they are not

also registered with KDP-controlled KRG. Baberi said the ministries of finance and defense are inextricably linked in Kurdistan, and as a result much corruption occurs. Baberi claims that the central government in Baghdad gave the KRG money for the disabled, for example, but that the funds were given to "party loyalists" instead. Baberi recommends removing the "financial chains" that bind people to the parties rather than to democratic principles. He believes pressure, however, should also come from the USG.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND ASSOCIATION

16. (C) Baberi said the press is not free, especially in KDP-controlled Kurdistan. He said newspapers and television stations cannot print or say anything against (KRG President) Masoud Barzani or the Barzani family. He believes such limits on free speech only end debate and make people "live in fear." Baberi said teachers and government workers who do not support KDP are "fired from their jobs." Baberi claims KIU is not allowed to run its own television station in Kurdistan because the market is so tightly controlled. He is hoping international pressure might allow for these policies to change. Baberi believes the role of independent, especially international, NGOs and human rights organizations should be expanded. Baberi claims several NGOs and unions cannot operate freely in Kurdistan, and must align with the PUK or KDP, which "severely compromises" the ability of these organizations to act independently. And as a result, Baberi said, they become "tools of the parties."

RELATIONS WITH THE USG

17. (C) Baberi claims "people on the street" in Kurdistan believe the KDP and PUK enjoy a "special relationship" with the USG. He said anytime the U.S. Ambassador meets with Presidents Talabani or Barzani, and it is broadcast in the news, many Kurds "draw conclusions" that might otherwise not be true. Baberi said he is having a difficult time even convincing KIU followers he has actually had meetings with the REO. Baberi inquired about the possibility of top-level members of the KIU having a regular audience with the Ambassador and/or U.S. officials in Washington DC. He believes that such an event, especially one that is broadcast via the international press, would do more to give Kurds a more favorable view of the USG, and Muslims "hope" that they, too, have a voice with the USG.

COMMENT

18. (C) Although only the opinions of a provincial director not working directly in Iraqi Kurdistan, Baberi believes KIU has a better grasp on the importance of democratic principles than their two rivals, the KDP and PUK. Baberi said KIU officials envision the party as some sort of "savior" for the Kurds, a group who can move debate back to issues of importance, such as freedom of speech and association, and get Iraqi Kurdistan back to the forefront of "how things are done right" in Iraq. While problems of corruption and government control in Iraqi Kurdistan could be debated, in conversations with Baberi it is obvious he believes KIU has a responsibility to speak out on these issues. Baberi claims any evidence they needed to move in this direction was proven by KIU's strong performance during the national election, and his confidence that the party would continue to gain ground in future provincial elections.

MUNTER